

THE COMING
OF THE
BRIDEGROOM

HENRY ALFORD, D.D.

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OF
THE BRIDEGROOM.

BY
HENRY ALFORD, D.D.,
DEAN OF CANTERBURY.



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The Coming of the Bridegroom.

I.

"Then [*more properly*, at that time] shall the kingdom of heaven be likened unto ten virgins, which took their lamps, and went forth to meet the bridegroom."—MATT. XXV. 1.



LET us listen, during the season which is now come upon us, to this Advent parable of our blessed Lord. While I set it before you, and endeavour to trace its meaning, and point its application, and while you hear and judge what I say,—may the same great Spirit of truth and wisdom rest upon us both.

The first little word with which the parable begins is of great importance. Very often "then" in our version of the Scriptures is

almost insignificant ; represents only the constantly recurring "but" or "and" of the original, serving merely to join parts of a narrative or discourse together, that there may not be an abrupt break between them. But here it is not so. "Then" in this place renders the Greek adverb of time, and, as I said in giving out the text, would have better been expressed by "At that time." The obvious question therefore to ask is, 'At *what* time?' And it will be best answered by referring to what went before. On doing so, we find that our Lord had just been speaking of the time during which He, the Master of the household, should be absent, and His coming expected.

Now I do not intend to trouble you in these sermons with any precisely detailed views as to the order of fulfilment of the various parts of this great prophetic discourse. Such

views I entertain, and am prepared in proper time and place to defend. But I do not believe this to be the time nor the place. Nor again do I think every one bound to state, or even to have settled for himself, such views in dealing with our Lord's words. Those words have, besides their precise and primary application, manifold references, extending over the whole lifetime of His Church: and we may take large and most profitable draughts of spiritual sustenance from them, without even attempting to taste their depths.

And thus in the case before us we may, if it seem best, regard the time described by Christ as covering the whole of the period intervening between His removal from us and the second Advent; the time during which it might be said by the servant, "My Lord delayeth his coming;" the time, in short, in

which we live. The chief and strict application of the parable may be, and I believe, is, to one portion of that long interval ; but unquestionably, it is not applicable to that portion only.

At that time, then,—at the time when the Lord shall be absent, the faithful servants watching, the unfaithful thinking His delay warrants them in forgetting and disobeying Him ; the Church keeping alive the promise of His coming, and the world questioning and scoffing at it,—at that time the kingdom of heaven, that is, the Church of God,—the state of the society of God's servants on earth,—shall be likened as follows. I have not as yet proceeded to quote the words of the similitude, because I would first direct your attention to the similitude itself.

The Lord likens the relation between Him-

self and His Church to that of marriage. And do not let us, because this likeness is very frequently used by Him, and of Him, in the other Scriptures, pass it over as matter of course, or lose its full significance here. The figure, as we are elsewhere told, signifies to us the mystical union that is betwixt Christ and His Church: *i.e.*, the union in spirit, and in a region beyond the ordinary thoughts and conceptions of men. This intimate and blessed accord and oneness is represented to us as being not yet fully accomplished. We are waiting for its accomplishment when the Bridegroom of our souls shall return to claim us, and we shall begin an eternal life of ineffable bliss in His glorious presence. And inasmuch as all who are His, who have loved and obeyed Him, are one in Him, and inasmuch as the great day of His return will be

one and the same for them all, that day is represented to us as the full accomplishment of His marriage to His Church ; with reference especially to that day, He is the Bridegroom, she is the Bride : and that day is the wedding day, and its feast, the marriage supper of the Lamb. For that day the Bride the Church, the aggregate of all the souls who are betrothed and espoused to Christ, is represented as evermore, during His absence, preparing herself. The cry of joy in that day is, "Let us be glad and rejoice, and give honour unto Him : for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and His wife hath made herself ready."

But as the whole Church is said to be ready when the number of the elect is accomplished and God's glorious kingdom is come : so in the gradual filling up of that number, the

readiness of the Church is made up of the readiness of her individual members; and each in his place and turn is called upon to be ready.

And again, as for the whole Church that final day is the consummation of her union with Him who gave Himself for her, and purchased her for His own, so for each one of us that shall, in a very solemn though not in an entire and final sense, be the day of His coming to us, when He shall loose the bands that bind us to the body and summon us to Himself. If not made ready for Him by then, we know not when the preparation can take place at all.

Now, bearing these things in mind, let us advance to the imagery of the parable.

In it the time of the wedding is at hand, and the bridegroom is expected, with his

procession, to fetch home his bride. But our attention is chiefly directed to a company whose business it was to wait his coming, just as it is ours to wait the coming of our heavenly Bridegroom. This company consists of ten persons—the usual number among the Jews signifying completeness, the least number which they held to constitute a society or a congregation, the number which, suggested probably by its occurrence in our own bodily arrangement, forms the basis of all our numeration. This number then signifies the whole—the Churches on earth—all the individual members of those Churches: for notice, it is not *anything in* that kingdom, but the kingdom itself, which is thus likened.

Now how are these persons described? They are given a name which it is true belongs as a matter of course to the circum-

stances of the marriage in the parable, but for which there is beyond doubt a deeper reason. These persons are called virgins. And thereby, to any mind conversant with Scripture imagery, is conveyed the idea of purity, and of devotion to the service of the true God. Those who have forsaken Him, and have gone after idols, are described in Holy Writ as impure, and guilty of spiritual unfaithfulness to their Lord. There are none such in this company. They are all His; all we may say, cleansed with the washing of the water by the Word, and reserved for Him.

Well, and what *did* this company of virgins? "They took their lamps, and went forth to meet the bridegroom." The description is important in every particular. And of all the minor particulars, the *lamps* are no doubt the most important, for the whole lesson of the

parable turns upon them. They took their lamps: in the older and better copies of our Greek text, "their own lamps," and it is generally now so read,—“They took their own lamps,” each her own. What does this mean? Something of her own, peculiarly belonging to herself, each of these virgins took. Her attention was directed to this, without which her errand would have been vain. Others may have possessed a similar thing, but these took care to have it with them as an especial object of attention. It seems to me that thus is exactly represented the awakening to the existence and the care of the soul, by which the religious—the member of Christ’s Church—is distinguished from the irreligious, who knows not of his soul, nor cares for it. Remark the language of Scripture symbolism elsewhere: “The spirit of man

is the candle of the Lord." Those who are baptized, those who have confirmed the vow of their baptism, may be said to have taken their lamps. They have taken their souls in hand. A light is kindled within them, to keep burning, as we shall more abundantly see by-and-by, till the Husband of their souls comes. That which with the greatest poet of old Rome was the lamp of this life, delivered by one to another, as by runners in a race, with us Christians is the lamp of a more glorious life—a lamp far more our own than this flitting flame that warms our mortal blood. The ten virgins took their own lamps. Even so, brethren and sisters, does every member of the Church. You and I have taken our lamps ; we know we have immortal souls, we have taken them in hand, grasped them, so to speak, and are standing with them,

not forgotten, not hidden, but objects of attention, objects of care. We cannot be as if we had not taken our lamps. When these ten went out of their houses, when they passed the streets, all could see them, all could observe them. O virgin soul! baptized into Christ, newly confirmed, it may be, in that profession, lately come from the Lord's table in the fulness of the same profession, you have taken, you have each time retaken your lamp. In the darkness of the world, in the dimness of the Church, there you stand with your lamp, for all to see, for all to remark on, for some to steer their way by. O see how you bear this lamp!

But more. The ten virgins took their own lamps, and—did what? Did they sit at home? No; they *went forth* to meet the bridegroom. Went forth—into the night.

It might be cold ; it might be stormy ; dark it certainly was : but they went forth. As we just said, they would be sure to attract notice. The crowd would gather ; insolent remarks might be made ; but they went forth. And so it is again with every member of Christ's Church ; with every member, that is, -worthy to be called one at all. His whole course is a going forth. As holy Paul was so fond of calling it, it is a walk, and he is a pilgrim. He *goes forth* to meet the Bridegroom. Even as Christian, in that grandest of allegories, with which we are all familiar, went forth from the City of Destruction.

And what does this mean, translated into life's language ? What, but this ? With the man of the world, with the woman of the world, the world is *home*. Its rules govern life : its hopes attract, its terrors terrify, and nothing

else. But the member of Christ's Church, the worthy baptized person, the earnest confirmed person, the honest and upright communicant, has shut the door of the world behind him, and taken his lamp and his pilgrim's staff, and is on his journey. He has gone forth. Not bodily, but in resolve, in spirit, in obedience. He may look at common times like other people: but let darkness fall around; let a great mist render the way uncertain, and there he is going straight on with his lamp. He knows the way, and he treads it firmly; his path is as a shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day.

And, as we saw just now, there may be many things to deter him from going forth. It is not a pleasant process, the first time we have thus to shut the door of the world behind us, and fare forth as the despised pilgrim.

Inside the world, the bright fire, the social group, the merry talk ; and outside, the dark, the cold, or the storm. Such a trial may come to the schoolboy, after his heart has been softened by holy words, and he has registered his vow before God, and has come from his first banquet with his Lord. The cheery converse may be at its height amid a group of old companions ; and there may come a moment when the honour of his heavenly Captain and the vow of his plighted faith must bring scorn upon him, if he have any truth in him ; and from that moment popularity must be cast off like a slough, and earned again like a new and better raiment : instead of accustomed applause, his lot may be cold aversion—from some at least, and for a season. Or the call may come upon some of you, earning your livelihood by resting late and rising early, and

with nothing to spare. Some hitherto allowed practice, some trick of trade, may be revealed to your conscience as you leave God's house, or rise from your bedside, as a thing which ought not to be done: the very practice, perhaps, on which depended your little profits, and the world's esteem, and your place in your street, and in your trade. Within, there is comfort, competence, the respect of men: but you must go forth, my brother, if you would form part of the kingdom of heaven, out of the comfortable brotherhood of the lax and unconscientious, into the dark and the cold, with your lamp in hand to guide you. For the description of us all who shall come to Christ's joy is this: "These are they that washed their robes—these are they that were redeemed from the world—these are they that were not defiled—for they are virgins." They have

taken their lamps, and gone forth from the world.

And lastly, *For what* have the ten virgins gone forth? Not for a journey without an aim; but "to meet the bridegroom." O my friends, what an object is this!

First, it is a definite object. "I know whom I have believed." "I sought Him whom my soul loveth." The ten virgins had been expressly selected for this office. They knew him who was the centre of the night's festival, and he knew them. And so it is too in the kingdom of heaven. One is the Bridegroom, and One only. Ask the angels, and they know Him. They sung of His birth, they ministered to His weakness, they watched in His tomb, they behold Him in His glory, they are waiting to come with Him. Ask the powers of nature—they know

Him: the winds and the seas were hushed at His word, and the sun veiled his face at His passion. Ask the sons of men—the glorious company of the apostles praise Him: the goodly fellowship of prophets praise Him: the noble army of martyrs praise Him: the holy Church throughout all the world doth acknowledge Him. Stand in the midst of any congregation—question any Christian family—knock at the door of any believing heart—these know Him. It is this Bridegroom—it is THE Bridegroom, that we have gone forth to meet. This is the attitude of every Christian Church, and of every Christian soul, in all the long ages of history—gone forth to meet the Bridegroom. He is the Desire of heaven and earth: all nature groans to see Him: every step in what we call history, all the boasted advances of men in knowledge

and power, all the gathering infatuations of princes and hierarchies,—these are but the preparations of His way under whose feet all things shall be placed in the end. If we have gone forth to meet Him, there is no doubt about the aim of our journey.

Next, it is a glorious object. He is the —Bridegroom—of His Church, and of every individual soul in it. And as in that blessed relation the man is the head of the woman, so the Head of every one of us is Christ: the Head of all this nature which we bear about us—the most glorious Person in our nature. And when we go forth to meet Him, every step of that our journey is a step nearer to being absolutely one with Him. When we see Him as He is, when we look in His blessed face, when we clasp His pierced hands, we shall be, we must be, like Him. And this is

as much as to say that all that progress, of going forth to meet the Bridegroom, is a raising up of our poor persons and our poor characters to the most glorious state of which they are capable: a fulfilling of the very highest end and aim for which our spirits and souls and bodies were created and sent into this world.

And therefore, next again, it is a final object, this going forth to meet the Bridegroom. There are many by-aims and ends in life: many pursuits of such a nature that if anything solemn were to happen they must be broken off as incongruous—all their time and trouble wasted, and another course begun. But this is never so with the going forth to meet the Bridegroom. He who is on this journey never need turn aside. All life is included in it: no energy is misbestowed on it

Is any afflicted? There is no road like this for comfort. Is any merry? There is no track like this for enjoyment. Why should they who have set forth to meet their soul's chief desire be daunted by the brambles on the path? How should they who are bidden to the marriage supper of the Lamb do otherwise than rejoice?

If then this journey be definite, worthy of a wise man's determination, if it be glorious, able to fulfil our highest wishes and desires; if it be final, so as to contain and to be the one end of life: and more than all this, if it be that to which we, members of Christ's Church, are bound and pledged,—in the name of all these considerations, and of Him who is the spring and centre of them all, let us renew our vigour in treading this road: let us all at this new Advent time

take our lamps, and go forth to meet the Bridegroom.

To *meet* the Bridegroom—then He is coming. Yes, He is coming. Let it be no scorn to any of us to avow and to act on this simple belief. Let others search and calculate, and let us reap all lawful fruit from their discovery of truth, knowing that all truth is God's. But here we take our stand: we know that that glorified Form of the Son of man and the Son of God lives and upholds all things by the word of His power: and is waiting to visit this earth in His Person. We cannot say when, but this touches not our faith.

This knowledge, this hope, we will yield for no man; persuaded that when other knowledge fails it shall stand; when all the rest of human hopes are disappointed, it alone shall end in perfect fulfilment.

II.

"And five of them were wise, and five were foolish. They that were foolish took their lamps, and took no oil with them : but the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps."—MATT. xxv. 2—4.



We have already considered the preliminaries of this great parable. We have seen the ten virgins take their lamps, and go forth to meet the bridegroom. We have also ventured to enter upon the general application. We spoke of these ten as representing, throughout the dispensation of waiting for the Lord's advent under which we live, those who, in dedication of themselves to Him, have taken in hand, so to speak, their souls, and have gone forth, undertaken the Christian journey, left, in heart and in the main issues of life, the world and its maxims ; and all this for the sake of meeting the Bridegroom—that is, of being

ready for their Lord and Saviour when He shall come.

And we said that, however there may be in the parable a primary and definite meaning, belonging to a particular period of the Church and an especial coming of the Lord, it was not our intention in this course of sermons or from this place to press that precise meaning, but to deal, now and here, with that particular reference which beyond doubt these words of Christ, like many other of His words, were intended to bear.

Well then, we are now ready to proceed. Fix your attention, I pray you, on these ten faithful souls, come out from the world with the intent to wait for their heavenly Bridegroom. And first let us say a word or two to make all clear about them : to be sure that we are not doing them wrong, and losing

thereby some instruction which we were meant to gain.

Look at them as they go forth. All are alike. In the circumstances of the parable, as gathered by the rule of ordinary life, we may conceive of them as dressed alike, ornamented alike, with lamps probably of the same showing and pattern. We have no right to say that any one of them was unworthy of the position which she occupied: as, for instance, that she was indifferent to the occasion, or, if we choose to go into the deeper significance of the parable, unfaithful to the bridegroom. And in the interpretation too, we have no right, as has been often done, to say that they are not all alike earnest, God-fearing, Christ-loving members of His Church: no right to charge any among them with hypocrisy, or want of

earnestness. We have only a right to assume so much difference between any among them and any others among them, as is warranted by the parable itself. And how much that is, will be plain from our opening words to-day : "*And five of them* (I give you the verses as now generally read after the most ancient authorities) *were foolish, and five were wise.*" This is the distinction. Not one of earnestness, not one of godliness, not one of singleness of purpose. Nor is it one again of small and great ability, or of little and much knowledge : the word *wise* here is not used in its intellectual but in its practical sense, meaning provident or prudent. Some of them were improvident, some were provident. So that we are not justified in adopting the idea countenanced by the common representation in painting, which shows

the wise as carefully and decorously arrayed, with vigilance in their posture and glance, and the foolish as in loose and careless array, indicating worldliness and love of pleasure. These considerations are of great importance, as on their being attended to depends our intelligent appreciation of the parable. It is -want of prudence, not want of heart or affection, which makes this distinction. And let me, before going further, add one general remark.

How often do we find this same distinction existing between persons equally good and equally earnest in common life! Take the management of an household—take the bringing up of children—do we not often see the very excellent of the earth making shipwreck of the things and persons they love best, and spend and are spent for, just because they

lack prudence? How many clever minds there are, how many loving hearts, into which common sense never seems to enter! And remember that each one of us Christians, members of Christ's Church, is not two persons, but one person. The world of our spirit is not a separate thing from the world of our mind and of our ordinary practice. Our religious characters are but reflections of our natural characters. So that in the Church likewise it is easy to imagine, indeed impossible not to see every day, that this same difference is found.

But one word as to the numbers thus distinguished. *Five* were foolish—*five* were wise. When our Lord was questioned as to the number that should be saved, He put aside the inquiry with a very plainly hinted rebuke. And here too we must not imagine Him giv-

ing us any insight, by this statement of equal numbers, into the inscrutable decrees of the great Judge; nay, rather does He, by the very equality of the numbers, discourage any speculative tendency that way. The most obvious division is that adopted by Him: the one about which there is the least reason to ask any further questions. If it leaves any impression on the mind, it is this, that it is an even chance, as we say, which line we ourselves take; that at every turn we have a temptation, as strong as our sense of right and prudence, to lead us astray: that we can therefore never afford to slacken our watch, nor to relax our attention.

But next, in what was this folly shown? Wherein did the imprudent differ from the prudent? "*For*," we read (I am again quoting the most ancient text), "*the foolish, when*

they took their lamps, took with them (i.e. with themselves—that is the word in the original) no oil : but the prudent took oil in their (or, the) vessels with their lamps."

This then was that wherein the prudence and the imprudence were shown. All took their lamps—all went forth into the night with their lamps burning. Up to this time there was no visible difference. The difference was unseen, or if any was seen it was to the advantage of the imprudent. Perhaps they were not troubled with these oil vessels, or their vessels were not weighted with oil—they were lighter and more fit to move, and less encumbered for their watch.

But note, I pray you, the real difference between them : and in noting that difference most of the rest of our time will be spent. Wherein consisted the folly of the foolish ?

Wherein the wisdom of the wise? In this. The former had forgotten that their lamps might need replenishing. They were burning brightly when they went forth; doubtless they would continue thus to burn. I do not mean to say that they reasoned thus: the mischief was that they did not reason at all. Prosperity in the present was with them security for the future.

But what did the others? As we saw before, it was not so much that they were abler, of a higher order, more pious, more faithful; but they were more *thoughtful*. They *took oil in their vessels with their lamps*. Who knows, they said within themselves, what may occur before the bridegroom comes?

We said before that these lamps answer very exactly in the interpretation to the souls of men, for which the unbelieving and unfaith-

ful who possess them care not, but which those who come out from the world and wait for Christ have to take in hand and care for. And now we may say, that this flame burning within them, and to be kept alive to the coming of the Bridegroom, is the light of Divine grace in the soul, kindled by the Spirit of the Lord : that light by which the Christian man walks and lives, and the quenching of which is the extinction of his spiritual life.

Now then what is the distinction, in the interpretation of the parable ? Is it not this ? That whereas this flame of the Divine life within needs continual feeding and ministering to, this is just that for which the foolish make no provision—imagining that the flame, once lighted, will burn on for ever ; or fancying that a Christian education, or a knowledge of Divine truth, will suffice, without diligence

given to minister nourishment to the spiritual life. Whereas the prudent, the wise, take oil in their vessels with their lamps ; are ever anxious to feed and provide for the light within by all available means ; look to the future, and not only to the past and the present.

Let us observe the difference a little more familiarly and closely. The feeding oil, in our case, may be explained as being all that large provision of means and appliances of grace by which we are surrounded and invited. Now how do we stand, my friends, with regard to these ? If we are in any sense members of Christ's Church, our spiritual life needs all the sustaining we can give it. It does not come naturally to us. To take our lamps and go forth to watch for the Bridegroom, this is not our matter-of-course way of proceeding. Say we have been baptized, say we have

been confirmed. Look at the words which were then used, and you will find mention of conflict and diligent endeavour; you will hear of praying that the rest of life may be led according to this beginning, of being strengthened with the Holy Ghost the Comforter, and daily increasing in the manifold gifts of grace. All this does not look as if it could be without effort. Now how many of you here present *are* leading your lives according to that beginning? How many *are* daily increasing in the gifts of grace?

Let us take some of these rich provisions of the oil of grace, and make them subjects of inquiry.

First, there is the great fountain of prayer, out of which flows daily oil for the light burning in the soul. Are there any among you foolish, and neglecting this chief source of sup-

ply? Now mind, I do not care a straw about any speculations concerning prayer, as to how it works, or whether we can give an account of what we mean by the answer to it. We do not understand enough of the mysterious ways of God to enable us to furnish a solution to such questions. We cannot say what considerations may enter the counsel of the Almighty will, by which all things are ordered. All we know of prayer is, that it is answered: sometimes according to its actual tenor, oftener otherwise than according to its actual tenor, but always to the advantage of him that prays. We know that the habit of prayer brings an amazing and never-failing supply of Divine influence to keep up the spiritual life within a man; and that without it the spiritual life languishes and dies.

Now let me ask those who hear me, Is there

any here who has taken his lamp and gone out to meet Christ,—in other words, who is a member of Christ's Church in anything like earnestness and honesty of purpose, and who yet is not in the habit of praying? And mind, I don't say is not in the habit of coming here—for here he is now: but who is not in the habit of praying? You know you may say morning and evening prayer, and may have said them for years, and may yet in all that time never once have really prayed. By saying, "Is not in the habit of praying," I mean is not accustomed to converse in heart and thought with God—for this alone is prayer. If there be such here, then have we an example of the foolish ones, who took no oil with them.

Again, God has provided for us, in the Old and New Testaments, abundant material for

knowing Him as only we can know Him, viz., as He has revealed Himself. Am I speaking to members of Christ who do not know, and do not study, do not care about, their Bibles? who let them lie unopened at home, and when they are read in church listen not with the heart, nay, perhaps not even with the outward ear? Then have we another example of taking no oil in the lamp.

And so I might go on through all those which are commonly known as means of grace. But leaving the others, I will mention but one more, and that one because of the very words in which we explain the benefit which we receive by it to be the strengthening and refreshing of our souls. Am I speaking to any who have taken the lamp and come forth to meet the Lord, and yet neglect the Holy Communion? Then have we here an example of

persons in this great matter foolish and improvident indeed. For there is no occasion of supplying the oil to the lamp of the inward life which in effectual working can compare to this one. In it we draw nearer to the realizing sense of Christ's work for us, than in any other ordinance ; and it is above all things that realizing sense of His work and presence which keeps alive the holy purposes, the warm affections, of the spiritual life within us. And mind, I say this in no sense that any Christian here present need question or differ from. I assert the paramount importance of this Holy Sacrament, at the same time repudiating as false and unchristian all the superstitions which have gathered round it elsewhere, and which, shame to the dishonesty of some among ourselves, are gathering round it even in this reformed Church. Take them

all away, as they are most carefully taken away by choice of the most effectual words for the purpose in our Communion Office, and I maintain that notwithstanding the absence of them all, nay, because of the absence of them all, this holy ordinance must by every faithful Christian man and woman be regarded as the one chief occasion when he realizes the presence of his Divine Lord, and feeds upon Him. And if any thinks that he can be waiting for his Lord to come, if any thinks that he can be a Christian or have any part in Christ while he is knowingly neglecting and keeping away from this, the chief of the means of grace, then we have an example of one to whom the comparison of these foolish virgins fits the very closest of all.

But I must not stop here, nor mention as supplies of oil for the spiritual lamp the open

and recognised means of grace alone. Day by day, hour by hour, the Holy Spirit is waiting to feed the flame within the members of Christ. Not one day in the week alone, not in one building in a parish alone, not by one book alone, not by the voice of a man in a pulpit alone, but by a thousand springs bursting up and flowing over our common life, is He ready to supply our vessels with the holy oil of His grace. And the difference again between foolish Christians and wise Christians is plain and palpable here. Doubtless in the streets through which the bridesmaids went there were places where they might have turned in to those that sold, and have bought a supply of the oil which they had missed taking at first ; but they had no mind for such an act of care : it never occurred to them ; or, if it did, they put the

thought by, and performed it not. And even so it is in common life. There are those who, from every day's events, from God's ordinary mercies and judgments, are ever gathering nourishment for the life within, strengthening holy purposes, combating sinful propensities, seeing Him whom to know is life eternal: and there are those, again, who gather no food at all for their life of good from such things; who heed them no more than the beast of the field heeds the landscape. Nay, the difference is seen not only in ordinary life, but in those portions also of our lives which are most calculated to make an impression on men. Set one man down to a trouble or an illness, and though the flame of good purpose and holy life may have been flickering before, he will come out with it burning brightly and steadily—the vessel full

of oil, the lamp trimmed ; but carry another man through the same, and he shall come out no way affected except with a sort of thankfulness which is more than half selfish, with resolutions unstrengthened, tempers unsubdued, the inner life shaken by the wind of the tempest without being refreshed by its rain.

So that all life through, not only in reference to great ordinances or important occasions, we have this difference between Christians. There are evermore, and everywhere, the foolish and the wise ; the improvident and the prudent : and, even irrespective of the immense results which we are to see follow from the difference, even at this stage of our consideration of the parable, when we have not yet taken them into account, there is no difficulty surely in seeing how unworthy

the imprudence is of our heavenly calling, how absolutely and always demanded by it is the wise and prudent provision.

Are you, my brother, my sister, awakened to the awful import of your place as a member of Christ's Church? Have you taken your lamp, become aware of the worth of the soul for which Christ died, and have you gone forth, with Him for your Master, and His coming for your hope? in other words, are you, as you sit and listen here, honest or dishonest, a disciple or an hypocrite? If the former and better of these, then trust not to the past,—what you have been taught, what you have gone through in mind or experience: trust not to the present,—to your sense of connection with Christ, your resolves of obedience to Him, your longings for union with Him; all these may flicker, may grow

dim, may even go out altogether : but, I beseech you, have this to trust to ; that your fresh springs are in Him ; that you have oil in your vessel with your lamp : and that that blessed supply is not held in a broken cistern of your own hewing, not dependent on your own sense of it, or your own state of mind or spirits ; but is drawn direct day by day from the living Fountain itself, accessible to all that seek it and at every time.

III.

"While the bridegroom tarried, they all slumbered and slept. And at midnight there was a cry made, Behold, the bridegroom cometh : go ye out to meet him. Then all those virgins arose, and trimmed their lamps. And the foolish said unto the wise, Give us of your oil : for our lamps are going out. But the wise answered, saying, Not so ; lest there be not enough for us and you ; but go ye rather to them that sell, and buy for yourselves."—MATT. xxv. 5—9.



THE ten virgins have come forth, each with her own lamp lit, and burning, to meet the bridegroom. So far we have accompanied them, and so far they are all alike. But last Sunday's meditation informed us somewhat more about them. Of these ten, each, we presume, fair and fairly arrayed, each seen by the equally bright light of her own lamp in her hand, we know that five have brought with them material wherewith to feed their lamps, while the other five have made no such provision. And in the inner meaning of the parable, this. We look over

this or any congregation. We see, or believe we see, a number of Christians who have in their rules of life and belief come forth from the world to prepare for the great meeting with the Husband of their souls. Those souls they have taken in hand, and have received in them the burning and warming and guiding light of God's Spirit. And here they stand, waiting for His coming : waiting for it, whether it arrive to them in its great general world-wide sense, as summoning them to meet Him in the air, or in its private individual sense, as calling them out of this present state to Him. Now of these Christians we know, by the revelation of such a parable as this, that some have been wise, and are storing up and taking with them that grace whereby the light of the Spirit may be fed and maintained ; and that others, perhaps

quite as many, have taken no such care, and are making no such provision. The one set value by and store up the means of grace, the other despise and neglect them.

Now let us go on with the parable. They went out to meet the bridegroom, but he did not immediately appear. He tarried, delayed his coming. This is one of the frequent hints which our Lord gave of a considerable period to intervene before His second advent. You may notice that He, though He has told us that the day and hour were hidden from all, even in some mysterious manner from the Son Himself, yet ever speaks with more precision on this point than do His apostles, from whom it was in the ordinary sense of the word kept secret.

Well, the bridegroom tarried. And what did these ten meanwhile? They all slum-

bered (literally, nodded) and slept. What do these words imply? It has not been quite agreed among expositors. Are they to be understood as conveying blame, or as expressing a matter of course? On the one hand, why should the circumstance have been introduced at all, unless some instruction were to be derived from it? On the other hand, for persons gone forth and waiting in the night, what more natural than that drowsiness and sleep should come on? I believe we may easily find a solution in these words, "what more natural?" It is that very circumstance that is brought before us for our instruction. That it is so, shows us the imperfection of our nature; shows us our inability to fulfil the strict requirements of Christian watchfulness. Observe, ALL were thus affected: not the improvident and careless only, but the

wise and prudent also. And even so it is with us. We all, of all characters and temperaments, are lax and remiss and careless, as compared with any even moderate standard of vigilance during the Bridegroom's delay. So there is necessarily a general blame of human infirmity conveyed in these words. At the same time, there is also a measure of consolation in them. "He knoweth whereof we are made: He remembereth that we are but dust." All allowance is given, by the just Judge, by the sympathising Saviour, for our infirmities. And therefore we must not be too much discouraged at finding ourselves overcome by the weakness of our nature; nor again, may we be, either as ministers or as private Christians, more exacting from others than He is, to whom they will have to give account.

But there is yet another view of the words.

They are true of the whole Church, as well as of individual members of it. "When the Son of man cometh, shall He find faith on the earth?" Then let no Church arrogate to herself perfect faithfulness, unwearied vigilance, infallible judgment; "they all slumbered and slept." Surely it can be naught but an idle dream, or worse, which we have been reading during this past week: a chief bishop with his under-shepherds gathered about him, standing in the temple of God, and likening himself to the Son of God, and claiming for his Church and office evermore to have been kept from error and unfaithfulness. While the Bridegroom tarries, they *all* slumber and sleep. The attitude of every Church on earth ought then to be humility, ought to be self-distrust, ought to be an abstinence from self-laudation and lofty claims. Nor ought

this lesson to be wholly lost upon ourselves. We too show oftentimes a reluctance to acknowledge the shortcomings of our own branch of the Church universal. We are given to pointing out how aptly this or that is arranged in her services, how beautiful and expressive is this or that prayer, how perfect are her creeds, or how blameless her articles. But she too, among them all, has slumbered and slept: has missed her point, or overshot it, as often as others; has refused to sweep away what was worn out and hindered her work, and has risen in anger against proposals shaped for the needs of the time, being bound with the leaden chain of precedent. And therefore millions have drifted away whom she has been too proud to pursue; and she, dowered as never Church was before for Christ's work in the world, lags after her missionary

duties, and lets their performance become the scorn of unbelievers. Other Churches may, in their corruption, have been more active for mischief; but surely none like her in her purity have been so powerless for good. Compared to the keen and sleepless eyes of the unsinning ones who watch for the signal in heaven, what is the most ardent hope, what the most fervent prayer of the saints on earth, but a slumbering and sleeping?

“At midnight there was a cry made, Behold, the bridegroom cometh: go ye out to meet him.” We often hear of the sudden inbreaking of a thief in the night as a symbol of this unexpected coming. He came just when he was least looked for—when sleep was at the deepest. And even thus is it with regard to Christ’s coming to the individual. That advent is something so unexpected, although

long expected, that even to the most watchful it is an awaking to a strange fact and a sudden presence. A man may be sick for years, and yet the hour when first he knows he has to die is a surprise to him ; a passing abruptly into a new sense of an awful reality. Yes, brethren, however watchful you or I may strive to be, and to think ourselves, the cry, " He is at hand, go and meet Him," will be to us like waking from a dream with a sudden shout. At midnight will the cry be made to each of us. And is not the same true of the whole Church? Long centuries has she been waiting for her Lord ; and yet her waiting, as we saw, is all like a slumber, and the note of His coming will be to her, whenever and however it comes, like this midnight cry. Imagine for a moment the contrast between the state of mind and oc-

cupation of the Church at any given time, and that which would succeed if the Lord came upon her, and we need not any more convincing of the justice of this similitude.

A voice then cried ; but what did it cry ? " Behold, the bridegroom ! " the word " cometh " is not in our most ancient copies : " Behold, the bridegroom ! " He was close, he was in sight, where that cry came from. My friends, what words are these ! To the whole Church, which long ages has waited for Him ; to each member of the Church who has come out from the world to expect Him, over whom one decade and another decade of years has passed, with no tidings of Him. At last He, in whom we have with difficulty believed ; He, about whom we have speculated and questioned ; He, who has been to us, at the very best, One read about, One rea-

lized in loving imagination and trust ; He is come, and calleth for us. The Bridegroom —One who shall complete us, shall fill up our miserable half-lives with the fulness of His eternal perfection, shall fold us close to Himself for ever and for ever !

And the other words of the cry are not to be passed over : "Go ye forth to meet him." But had not they gone forth already ? My friends, in this matter there is a going forth, and there is another going forth. Of the first we have already spoken : that heart and life separation from that which is selfish and unloving and ungodly, which all put upon them when they take their souls in hand to wait for the Bridegroom. But when the cry is made that He is in sight, oh then there must be another and a different going forth. Not the world only and the world's maxims and

creed must be left behind in heart ; but all this place that God has given each of us to fill, the home that has been so long over us, and the books that we loved, and the voices whose sound refreshed us, yea, and the weeping faces round the bed,—these all must be cast off like the garment when they said, “ Arise, He calleth thee.” Yes, and yet more : this closest and most familiar home of all, the lifelong investiture of the personality of each of us, even this body, must be laid aside, and we must go forth, beings unknown, on a path unknown, to meet Him—to stand, spirit to spirit, close up to Him who died for us and reigns over us, who claims us, and shall judge us, the Bridegroom of our souls. This is that last going forth, that exodus from our house of bondage, that midnight departure much to be remembered through the ages of eternity.

Well, the cry sounded round them, and they spring up from their slumber. "Then all those virgins arose;" there was not one whom the cry had not awakened. This belongs mainly to the great general application of the parable: as the flash which shineth from the one end of the heaven to the other end of the heaven, so shall the coming of the Son of man be. Every one shall hear, every one shall see,—as plainly as if the trumpet blew and the cross in the heavens blazed out for him or her alone. "They all arose, and trimmed"—or rather "cleared up," adorned, it is literally—"their own lamps." The common house lamp even now used in the south of Europe and the East is apt to become club-wicked if left to burn long, and has a small needle hanging to it with which to clear it out. This it was which they did; not the

trimming, as we commonly understand it, which would necessitate putting out the lamps and cutting the wick.

And what shall we say that this arising, this purging the wick, imports? I am surely speaking to some who know well. At the first overwhelming sense of danger, at the first irresistible consciousness of God's presence being near us, or after the moment when a soul that was in contact with our own has passed into the other world, what is the process which the mind rapidly, half unconsciously goes through, but this, the clearing of the lamp, the purifying the flame? That favourite scheme of yesterday, that ardent earthly desire that hung like a fungus on the wick, troubling the spiritual life,—how they are severed and drop off at such a time!

And then, and not till then, appeared a

difference. But not at the first moment. All the flames had been dull ; none sprung up into brightness with the first clearing out : but after that came the difference. Five were in a moment burning steadily and clearly ; five were flickering down, showing the red wick and the scanty tongue of flame. Why ? Five had been fed ; but the other five there was nothing to feed. The foolish said unto the wise, " Give us of your oil : for our lamps are going out." Not " are gone out." The verb is in the present tense, and ought to have been so rendered. The lamps were not extinguished, the flame had not died ; the pouring in of a little oil might repair the mischief : they did not want relighting, but only feeding.

Let us pause a little for the interpretation. The cry is heard at midnight—the sudden

notice—say, by two among us. Each one springs up awakened, each one clears out the flame within. Alas! it is but faint and feeble at the best, and the Bridegroom is very near. All that ought to be bright is dull; all that ought to be firm and strong is fainting and fluttering. And then the wise one turns the oil vessel and feeds the flame. The knees are bent, the hands are clasped; the desires of the heart rise to the foot of the throne: or the holy Book is taken down; it is as a fair pasture land where every footpath is known, and the weary soul goes straight to the wells of salvation, and draws: or the blessed table of the Lord is spread, and the fainting one is strengthened and refreshed by His body and blood. All these ways are accustomed and familiar to the wise one, who has carried the oil in the vessel with her lamp.

But how shall the other fare, for whom the throne of grace has long had no charms, who has lost the power to pray, and the very language itself of prayer? to whom the Bible is a land unknown—a treasure-house doubtless for the need, if but only the treasure could be found? that foolish one, who has heard the call to the Lord's table so long unmoved, that the banquet has no sweetness? The lamp is going out. What minister of Christ has not stood over beds where all this has its example? What one has not witnessed the departure of souls with "Oh if I had but" on the lips?

But what is the request that accompanies the sad discovery? The foolish said to the wise, "Give us of your oil: for our lamps are going out." Alas, the wish is vain! For "no man may redeem his brother, nor make agree-

ment unto God for him." Now we see the fitness of that emphatic little word, their *own* lamps, twice repeated: not another's lamp, not another's flame, not a flame fed with another's oil. God is jealous of His part in us; He alone will live in, will minister grace to, our souls. No merit but His shall clear us; no Spirit but His shall guide us; no fatherhood but His shall perfect our adoption. There lives not a being who is dependent on another being for the life eternal; no angel, no saint, no priest, can give us of his oil; if there be no oil in our own vessels, our lamps must go out.

The answer of the wise ones in the parable has, some have thought, no exact counterpart in the interpretation: "But the wise answered, saying, Not so; lest there be not enough for us and you: go ye rather to them that sell,

and buy for yourselves." And yet I should be loth to imagine that any such words as these of our Lord's in His parables were ever thought and uttered by Him in vain. "The righteous are scarcely saved." No wise soul, no holy saint, has anything to spare of that wherewith he is to stand before God. None of us appropriates by faith and love more of Divine grace than is enough for him or for her. This is surely one lesson to be learnt from the reply. And there is yet another and another. As for example, this: "Rather go ye to them that sell." Then there are those who, of course from no exuberance of their own, but by regular appointment from Christ, are in some sense the treasurers of His stores, and dispensers of this oil of grace to feed the spiritual lamp,—ministers of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God. To the Church, and

her ordinances and her ministrations, this is the direction, and not to their fellows, in which these of the defective inward life are referred, for its renewal and sustenance. And as yet another matter to be learned from this reply note this—"Buy for yourselves." In one sense, the wine and milk, if we will, the oil, of the gospel is furnished without money and without price. God requires no costly, no unnatural sacrifices; the unsearchable riches are as much within the power of the poorest as of the wealthiest. But in another sense every drop of that oil a man must buy for himself. Nothing, and of all things no spiritual gift, without labour. Earnestness, diligence, perseverance, self-denial,—these are the coins which we must pay for the flame-renewing oil.

The covenant in which we find ourselves

with God has two sides, like every other covenant. He on His part will most surely keep and perform His side of the promise; He is pledged to do us good, to renew us unto life by His Holy Spirit, to give us pardon and life everlasting; but we must also faithfully promise for our parts to seek unto Him and be faithful unto Him. All the grace we seek for He is pledged to give us: but not grace unsought: "Go ye to them that sell, and buy for yourselves."

And so they part: the prudent, to meet the bridegroom, even now close upon them; the improvident, to do at last, in the hurry and uncertainty of the moment, what ought to have been done long before; what their own lightness, and carelessness, and feeling of security, stood in the way of their caring for at the outset. What success attended

their tardy endeavours to repair the error, we shall see hereafter.

Meanwhile we have here represented to us what often takes place in the experience of life: the earnest and agonized attempt to make up for lost time and opportunities which follows on spiritual alarm: the eager resolves on beds of dangerous sickness, the softening of the hard worldly heart under bitter bereavement, the melting away of the compacted fabric of unbelief before the approaching fire of God's presence. In our portion of to-day nothing is said as to whether this late-taken care was of any avail. For aught we know as yet, they may have found them that sold; the supply may have been quick, the result happy, and they may have rejoiced their prudent sisters, and taken their places in the procession before the

arrival of the bridegroom. Let those who trust to such good fortune (and they may be numbered by thousands everywhere), let them come again, and hear what followed in the parable.

IV.

"And while they went to buy, the bridegroom came. And they that were ready went in with him to the marriage : and the door was shut. Afterwards came also the other virgins, saying, Lord, Lord, open to us. But he answered and said, Verily I say unto you, I know you not. Watch therefore : for ye know neither the day nor the hour."—MATT. XXV. 10—13.



E left the band of virgins divided : the wise had supplied their lamps with oil, and were gone to meet the bridegroom, now announced as at hand : the improvident had gone to buy oil to keep their lamps from going out. And therein we saw the portraiture of two classes of Christians in the Church : the one class, those who are ever anxious to gain more of God's grace and Divine help, and to keep their souls ready for the summons of His presence ; the other, those who imagine that the religious life, once begun, is safe ; that because they are called and presumed to be Christians, and

have at some time felt the flame of love and zeal within them, all will be well. Then upon both of these comes the call, unexpectedly, that God is near. The one class are ready ; or, if they are sensible of being unready and slumbering, and the flame in their hearts burns low, yet the supply is within their grasp, and they can apply to it and refresh the flame. The other, taken by surprise and terrified, praying for help where help is none, are referred to those that sell : to the ordinary ministers of God and means of grace. But the great question is, Is there time? Can the process of buying for themselves be gone through in a moment? Will not the Bridegroom have arrived before they return? Will the fainting soul, out of the habit of prayer, ignorant of Scripture, unused to feed on Christ in His Supper, be able to

recover the lamp before it is summoned away?

I need not tell you that this is a most painful question. I have walked away before now from death-beds, and the inquiry has pursued me home, Would those words, those prayers, that Holy Communion,—all the work of a first compunction after years of carelessness, could they, in this short twilight hour of life, have fitted the soul for the heavenly Bridegroom? And if they have, why should we take the trouble to live holy, careful lives? Why should we deny ourselves, and make lifelong search after Christ, if He can be found in these few useless minutes at the end? Ah, brethren, such questions are too hard for us. God knows each individual case: ours be it to judge no uncharitable judgments, but rather to hope even against

hope ; to speak in Christian language of the departed, even where man judges otherwise. For it is better thus—better for ourselves, and better for the great cause of charity, which is the one most excellent way, and which is to cover, not to judge, the multitude of sins.

But meantime, while we in our weakness speak and think thus, let us listen to the voice of the parable.

“While they went to buy, the bridegroom came.” There are moments that are worth more than years. We cannot help it : there is no proportion between spaces of time in importance nor in value. A sick man may have the unwearied attendance of his physician for weeks—and then may perish in a minute because he is not by. A stray unthought-of five minutes may contain the

event of a life. And this all-important moment, this moment disproportionate to all other moments, who can tell when it will be upon us? What a lesson to have our resources for meeting it available and at hand! This in the parable was a moment of that kind: one to which all these ten had long looked forward: it came—but it came to these foolish ones just when they were away and had no part in it. They might have gone and bought oil twenty times over while the bridegroom tarried, and they slumbered and slept: but they just went now, and lost him for ever.

“While they went to buy, the bridegroom came.” To what does this point, to what can it point, in the interpretation, but to the fact that there is a time too late to seek what all must find before they can see God? that

there are those who hear the midnight cry, who fall prostrate in their souls before God, and wrestle for grace ; but before that grace has fed the lamp, the hour is come ?

And note what follows. "They that were ready went in with him to the marriage feast : and the door was shut." What can be more hopeless than the condition in which the others find themselves on their return ? But they are represented in the parable as making at all events the attempt to enter. They stand in the night, in the darkness outside, of which the Lord often speaks elsewhere : they come and knock, and say, "Lord, Lord, open to us." But they have, by their absence at the one decisive moment, forfeited their place among the rank of the bridesmaids : "He answered and said, Verily I say unto you, I know you not." You have

no place here. Whatever you may have once been called to, your names have dropped out of the reckoning for this feast, and I have no knowledge of you. And here the tale concludes. Here the inquirer is baffled, and the sad mist drops down over the end. And so it ever is in Holy Scripture. It may be said, we know but very little of the bliss hereafter : but we know still less of the woe. And as eye never saw, ear never heard, and the heart of man never conceived the one, so it is equally vain for us to attempt to penetrate the dark mysteries of the other. Rash words are continually being uttered, and minute details are given, where God's Spirit has seen fit to be silent, and in doing so has taught us to be silent also. Even what is revealed is given to us in an earthen vessel, and breaks the vessel in the giving.

Human language is taxed to the uttermost for figures to convey any idea of these things to us, and it fails. And, my brethren, it is well it should be so. We Christians are called, not to perdition, but to salvation: we ministers are sent, not to preach hell, but to preach Christ; to proclaim, not the gospel of denunciation, but the gospel of love.

And it often seems to me that more effect for warning, more for converting sinners would be produced by us, if we simply took this matter as it is uttered in passages of Holy Writ, as each comes before us, and abstained from intensifying and adding horror on each occasion. Let us try to do this now. Look at what is here represented to us. This coming of the Bridegroom is the most joyous day for heaven and earth, the most joyous for the Church, the most joyous for

every faithful soul. All nature has been earnestly expecting it; for then first shall the wilderness rejoice and blossom as the rose; then none shall hurt or destroy, but the redeemed of the Lord shall come with songs and everlasting joy upon their heads, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away. The whole Church from the first ages has been looking for it as the end of conflict and the beginning of everlasting rest; every faithful soul has yearned for it as revealing the full estate of bliss which the Saviour purchased with His blood. It is the birthday of the sons of God—the first full and blessed manifestation of their perfected life.

Now set against this—"The door was shut." The improvident ones had no part in all this joy. And this cannot be all. Where shall the soul be that is shut out from Him whose

présence, the revelation of whom in all His beauty and glory is the highest enjoyment of the soul? Do not some of us know on earth what it is to have missed some great advantage, which has hopelessly gone by: and if the loss has been occasioned by some paltry trifling omission, some negligence as to time, or as to mere form, how far more biting is the pang which seizes us as often as we think over our irreparable loss and our utter folly? And if this be so with some earthly loss, which may after all turn out to have been a gain, oh what will it be when all is lost—all we were made for—all we have thought for—spoken for—lived for!

Look at it again in this way. When earthly remorse overtakes us, see what manner of men we are:—selfish men, vain men, self-deceiving men. The bitterest pang is eased

by a hundred excuses ; the dull blinding mist of disappointment is lighted up by a hundred tapers of self-esteem, and the weight of the irrevocable past is lightened for us by the necessity of keeping up good appearances before men. And then if all else fail, there is Time, which rounds off all piercing edges, and decorates every ruin with flowers ; and last of all, there is hope, which, in spite of every resolve not to hope, springs up all around, and summons us to action. But what will it be when every one of these alleviations is swept away—when all is valued at its true price, self is seen through, human opinion is a dream fled for ever, hope has ceased to be, and the future is a mere reflection of the past ?

And what a lurid light is thrown back on that past by the answer of the Bridegroom from within ! What words are these, “ I know

you not " ! To have been baptized into Christ—to have followed Christ—to have perhaps preached Christ—and then after all to be repudiated by Him—disowned—disclaimed as friends. O my brethren, what scenes there will be in that day of His coming, when many, whom men have thought peculiarly His, shall turn out never to have belonged to Him at all ! What a terrible thing it is which happens every now and then, when a man of decent life, religious profession perhaps, some day turns out to have been cherishing in his bosom some foul sin—sinks away out of sight, and is quoted as a terror ! but what shall this be to those disclosures which shall then flash on the astonished world ? Many that were first shall be last. He whose lamp once burned so brightly that all men held him for a saint,—he became

careless, and let the holy words pass over his ears, and took no note of them, and so there was no oil, and he was shut out. That preacher, whose eloquent words poured out persuasion, whose whole tone was that of one who lived in God's presence,—alas, he watered others without refreshing himself : he believed not his own facts, and his inward thoughts had an answer for his own arguments : look not for him at the marriage supper of the Lamb ; there was no oil to feed the flame of spiritual life in him, the lamp went out, and the door was shut against him.

We pursue the excluded—we can pursue them—no further. As we said before, we speak not to-day of the peculiar prophetic place of the parable in its first and especial meaning. We are now on its general application : to the whole Church—to every Chris-

tian soul. So we will turn, in concluding, to the Lord's final words.

"Watch therefore: for ye know not the day, nor yet the hour." So the verse stands in all ancient copies and versions without exception. The words "when the Son of man cometh" have been inserted by the moderns to make the saying uniform with others where this ending occurs.

"Watch therefore." Let us take the connection, the inference, first: and then the nature of the duty forced on us by it. "Therefore." Why? The Lord Himself gives the reason. We are to watch, because we know not the day nor yet the hour. If it were revealed to us from heaven that on a certain day the Bridegroom of our souls would be upon us, we might think that we should be certain of being ready for Him. But even then it

might not be so. Of the appointed day we should not know the hour, and thus should perhaps miss His actual arrival : and even of the hour, if that were revealed, we might miss the minute. We know absolutely nothing of His times and counsels. We nourish plans for next week, next month : it is natural to us so to do, and we cannot avoid it : but before the time for the nearest of those plans arrives, the dust may have been sprinkled over us, and our names may have dropped away from the lips of men. It is not safe to trust to having any, even the least amount of time for going to them that sell, and buying to brighten the lamp at the last. Who has not heard of the sudden heavy fall—who has not heard of friends breaking in at the morning hour, and finding the spirit gone ? Who has not heard of the crash, and the devouring

flame, and the crushed remains, or the unrecognised ashes?

“Therefore”—says the Lord of our spirits and the Lord of love; He who made us, and cares for us, and died for us, and shall judge us—therefore, because this is so, “watch.”

And what is meant by “watch”? These words of His, which are to last when heaven and earth have passed away, have a thousand shifting hues as they run their eternal course, reflecting each age of the world, and its ways, and its weaknesses, and its duties. And so this command to watch has put on different meanings at different times. In days when war and fierce passions were the world’s employ, they carried to Christian ears a command to camp out in the wilderness, and abandon social life and human comforts. And it may be that in those times there was

a certain truth in the sound. We at all events have reaped the benefits of those desert vigils in treasures of Divine wisdom and examples of lofty self-abandonment. But it is to another kind of watchfulness that our Master summons us of this age. Our regular lives of peaceful employment and social duty call for no such violent remedies ; and if such are applied, they furnish examples either of ridiculous affectation, or of revolting duplicity.

Let us examine this command to watch with reference to our own days. And in doing so we need not at all cast off the idea of religious exercise and devotion. What has been already said on the parable will, I trust, prevent our doing so, and will keep the diligent, earnest use of the means of grace, public, family, and private, for our time as for all time, one chief ingredient in this enjoined watchfulness.

Still, when this is laid down, we must not be unwise, but understanding what the will of the Lord is. God's good providence orders the times that pass over us, each age as it comes, for us to understand and use, not to rail at and find fault with. One would suppose from the talk and practice of many good men, that the first duty of life was to be discontented with the times in which God has placed us. Such conduct seems, by whatever assumption of superior wisdom of the past it may come recommended, to be rather that of the foolish virgins than that of the wise. If the lamp is to burn, it must be with fresh oil of the present, and in the atmosphere, however compounded, which now surrounds us.

In order then for any effectual watch of God being kept, we must study, and we must be acquainted with the especial characteristics

and duties of our own times, and in and by them, and not by those of another age, must we prepare for His coming, both to the Church and to ourselves.

Now what will this import, as applied to us of the present day? What has been God's dealing with us of to-day in the matter of religion and of the waiting for His coming? Let us look at it sensibly and fairly. What do we see in this Christian country? Is not this the prominent feature of our Christianity, that any dream of entire unity of belief has been by God's providence utterly broken down; that the differences of Christian bodies and churches are multiplied and still widening; that the vision of uniformity in things outward which our fathers entertained has for ever vanished; and yet that amidst all this variety the great first principles of Christianity are

actuating men, and are dwelling in national consciences, though inconsiderably compared with what ought to be, yet to an extent hitherto altogether unknown? It was remarked only a short time ago by a shrewd worldly observer of men and things, as the great wonder of the last few years, that movements are now taking place, and changes are avowedly based, directly on first principles; that we hear daily less and less of expediency and of petty caution, and more and more of great, deep, abiding, unmistakable rules and motives. If it be so, let us thank God for it—but let us see His hand, and obey Him likewise.

Does not such a consideration lead us to conclude that the true watch of God in our times is rather to look to Christian conduct, than to any outward profession whatever? God has given us an immense advantage for

promoting in our days, and giving examples of, purity, charity, justice : but He has put us, and especially us of this country, under the greatest disadvantage for party conflicts, for proselytism to our own faith and worship, for putting down others who differ from us. Every attempt at such a course, within or without our own pale, only serves to render it more impossible for the future.

“ Watch therefore.” Seek, each one, every opportunity of nourishing the sacred flame by thoughts, by words, by acts, of purity, justice, charity. It is not by abundance of religious seasons and rites, it is not by rigid observance of religious seasons and rites, it is not by denouncing all who cannot utter our passwords, that we shall be preparing for the day and hour of which we know not : not by loud echoing of uttered beliefs, but by intensity

of inward faith; not by barring every door except that by which we ourselves entered, but by opening the gates that the righteous nations which loveth the truth may enter in: by being that which God, interpreted by His actual present dealings with us, would have us to be: by serving Him in our generation, and letting our light shine before the men of our generation. And thus may it be found, when the midnight cry is made, if at the best dim and flickering, yet close to the Fountain of light, and easily supplied; thus may it, after the night-watch is for ever done, pass with us into the heavenly banquet, and shine out as the sun in the kingdom of our Father.



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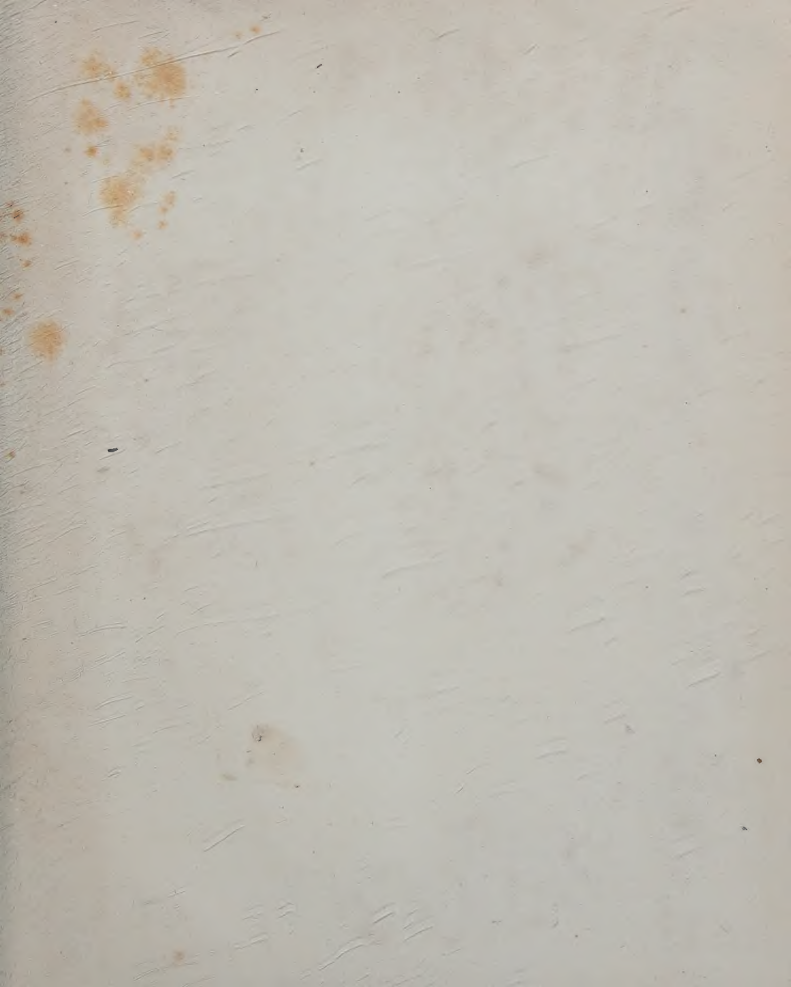
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